

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES
CLASS AWARENESS

RECENT WORKSHOPS ON
SOCIAL CLASS AWARENESS
IN NORTH LONDON
SCHOOLS

by

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&
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WORKING PRESS RESEARCH
1993

As Working Class people

*who have chosen to be
or found ourselves as*

**INTELLECTUALS
&
ARTISTS**

we would like it understood once and for all that

WORKING CLASS
We are Still

One of a series of nine A4 posters made by Stefan Szczelkun in response to the Arts Councils National Arts and Media strategy papers in November 1991.

SOCIAL CLASS AWARENESS IN SCHOOLS

as part of the equal opportunities programme.

This pamphlet presents the results of recent trial training workshops in North London Schools. Our short term aim was to achieve a recognition that working class students suffer disadvantage in the educational process. Simply the recognition of the issue of class as part of the equal opportunity policy in a school is a great start.

However, we recognise that class oppression creates limitations for everyone whatever your class identity. The insights on which we based this training come from the work we have done as artists, on our own working class identity, as well as on published sources of information. We think that the most realistic way to improve class awareness is not to provide another set of do's and don'ts, nor to tell teachers how to teach. It is more effective to support teachers to start from a relaxed awareness of their own class identity based on the two major areas that constitute class identity. These are our current job and the cultural values of our upbringing. Sometimes these identities clash and we provide a historical perspective which can clarify the causes of such confusion.

The most common word associations with 'class' are often such things as struggle, conflict and war. Work on class might induce some personal emotional turmoil but in the classroom the result will be **peace**. And keeping in mind the broader vision, class awareness will also lead to greater world peace. We are well aware of the emotions that can be aroused by this subject and we manage this area with great care and sensitivity.

Equal opps' work on class awareness is often rejected because it is seen as political. Our work is no more 'political' than work on gender or racial oppressions. In fact work on class as part of the equal opportunity programme will reduce resentment, create unity and generally make the work to end every form of oppression more effective.

Finally we recognise the diversity of contemporary working class experience and do not romanticise old stereotypes.

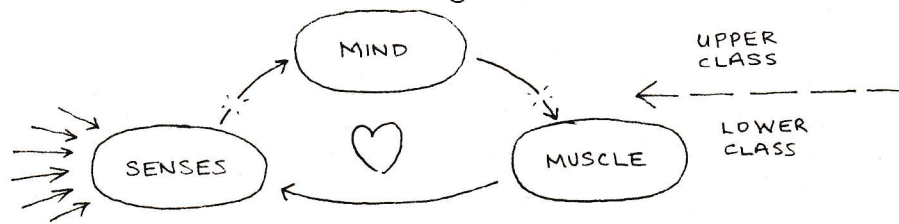


Talk on the Historical Basis of Class Identities:

NOTES.

by Stefan Szczelkun

1. A model of Human Functioning.



2. The capitalist class arises by harnessing the productivity of the new scientific thought with its universal laws. Skills in finance, trading and publishing come together with this to create a new form of knowledge which is seen as 'universal'.

3. This new group of people owe their immense power to scientific thought. They see their dominance as the result of a superior breed of intelligence.

4. As it was our higher intelligence which differentiated man from the animals, then it was only this class who were fully human. The rest of us are then designated sub-human.

5. The ruling class and their dominant culture are characterised by a distancing from the physical and emotional.

6. In order to be able to oppress the oppressor must not feel the effects of what they are doing. All oppressor cultures involve an emotional shut down...stiff upper lip or machismo.

7. The dominant culture comes to be characterised by knowledge mediated through books, a disdain for physical production and a rigid control or denial of emotion. The values of the dominant culture become the model for the whole of society to look up to. Generally known as Good Taste.

8. But in the 20thC capitalism required many workers to become brain workers. Mass education evolved and many people gained a certification of their intelligence. This contradicted the definition of the working class as 'without higher forms of intelligence'. So the new 'white collar' workers qualify to take over the title 'middle class' from the capitalist class creating a confusion of identity and a massive apparent division of interest in the broad working population.

Accent as a Class Barrier by Tracy Davidson

By the 15th century standard English emerged from a variety of different dialects spoken across Great Britain. This standard English is the most generally accepted form and is the only type taught in British schools. This often leads to children's speech being corrected in the school which can be very damaging to a child's identity. It dismisses a major part of his/her life, and can therefore lead to confusion. The main reason for these corrections of speech is that there is a strong feeling that regional or 'unattractive' accents can hinder later opportunities, especially career and job prospects. This is undoubtedly the case, but surely nothing will change if we continue to make people feel ashamed of the way they speak.

On the whole accents reflect social privilege, standards of education and culture. Anyone or anything outside of that privileged group is thought to be distasteful and vulgar by those within it. Accents are learned from childhood and are then habitual, but can be altered. Some people alter the way they speak to feel more confident about themselves and to fit in with certain groups of people and to be more acceptable than they would be with their own accent.

What about people with non standard accents, mainly working class people, who go on to higher education and who do not change their accents? There is a huge risk involved here of not being taken seriously. *"The most stigmatised accents are those closely identified with the working classes in certain large industrial conurbations. The ability of such speakers to retain their accents and at the same time be credited with the quality of educatedness is further limited by the range of speaking styles which have evolved among users of such accents."*

Honey 1991. see bibliography.

It all boils down to one thing in the end; those with standard English accents are undoubtedly taken more seriously than those without. This is something we can change both at home and in school, by making children more confident about who they are and what they stand for, in order for them to move forward and have choices, choices that many of their parents probably didn't have. Of course it will be a slow process, people's attitudes can't be changed overnight, but I believe that confidence is the key, and with that kept alive things will improve with time.

WORKSHOP PART ONE: IDENTITY BY OCCUPATION

An appreciation of work is essential to understanding a working class viewpoint. So whatever your class identity, where better to begin than to appreciate your own job! The teachers we worked with all seemed to love this part of our training session the best! When else do they get the chance to say what they really value about their jobs and also to get off their chests what they really hate? We had everyone speak in turn so they also get a chance to hear from everyone. There is something powerful and respectful about allowing everyone to be heard apart from the fact that the quietest people have some of the best ideas. This in itself creates a feeling of solidarity. Our assumption here is, first, that it is not easy to think well about social class in school if you do not have the space to consider how the basic class relationship of work for money affects you. Second, we do not think that trying to motivate people by simply pointing out how bad the situation is for working class young people is effective.

One man insisted that he had not enjoyed anything about his job for at least two years. With persistence he found something to say and the change in his demeanour from then on was uplifting for everyone.

Clearly, whatever their perceived identity, teachers share many issues of work and exploitation with working class people. Making this clear can be a great basis for making good relationships with working class parents, as one teacher pointed out to us with a couple of anecdotes.

This is a short exercise but it does demonstrate a model form of meeting, a support group if you like, which we recommend teachers consider using in the future.

Another broader assumption is that we are working towards the full recognition of the irreducible dignity of every human being. This includes teachers!

Apart from creating some self awareness of the working class aspects of the job of teacher, this exercise gives space to unburden from the pressures of teaching which helps people to give full attention to the rest of the workshop.



WORKSHOP PART 2. CULTURAL VALUES/BACKGROUND

This was structured as a series of three rounds of questions;

1. Where did you live before the age of seven?
2. What were your parent's/ guardian's jobs?
3. A good memory of a toy, game or activity from this period?

Assuming that our early years are influential to our deep value structure this gives the group an idea of where people are 'coming from' without needing to categorise people at all rigidly. Class identity is characterised in individual cases by complexity and diversity and the idea is not to force people into pigeon holes.

We ask for good memories to avoid people getting drawn into looking at issues that are too emotional for such a short workshop. In a longer workshop we could go on to ask people to share on first memories of school and going on to higher education.

Again this provides a model form and we explain how this could be used and developed in the future if required.

This exercise rapidly produces high levels of trust and mutual respect in the group. It illustrates the basis of class cultural values in early childhood experiences and also the diversity of this experience.

Most of the teachers we worked with had working class backgrounds. One woman with a middle class background felt she would meet prejudicial attitudes by revealing the fact her father was a lawyer. This was not helped by the fact that the rather unaware Headmaster was in the room! However we do not force people to answer or participate and this incident did reveal how threatening having what is perceived as the wrong class identity for the situation can be!

At this stage we would prefer to work with groups who voluntarily choose to do the work. At the same time, whatever the circumstances, people are likely to get benefit from these exercises and be able to think about class a bit more clearly afterwards.



WORKSHOP 3 : APPLICATIONS

We do not set out to tell teachers how to teach, nor do we expect them to find extra time to do this work. Nor is there a set of rules to follow.

We prefer to ask teachers for their own ideas and simply give them space to think, making contextualising comments or offering information to support their own ideas.

Suggestions that have come up in this process have included such things as....

1. New ways of involving working class parents in school activities and making them feel welcome by choice of venue etc. Teachers talking about their own backgrounds is often a surprise to working class parents and puts them at ease.

2. Recognising that the transition to higher education can be particularly stressful for many working class young people who know that they may have to give up their accent and lose their close connection to family and friends or be the focus of heavy classism at college. This may be expressed as an apparent reaction against education in itself.

3. Working class teachers have a lot to show more middle class teachers here! Their thinking needs to be respected.

4. Introducing projects on class into the curriculum, e.g. Humanities, sociology and history.

As stated in the introduction the simple acceptance of the issue as part of the school E.O. policy is our first aim.

We also emphasise the invisible difficulties that working class students may have in considering further education options. We illustrate this from our own experience. Of course we can talk with most authority about art options.

Our supporting folder of information does include a few preliminary items to inform the above process and throw in a few ideas or references.

We could act as consultants to throw up possible solutions on particular issues, to act as informed arbitrators or relationship counsellors but we won't do this unless we are asked.

We are also keen to see working class artists from our network working in schools. We intend to research possible grant support for this scheme and would appreciate any information, invitations or ideas.

STEFAN SZCZELKUN

born 1948

My dad was Polish and came over during the War and married my mother who was a nurse. He was a draughtsman in the aerospace industry. I was brought up in the south west London suburbs and was from what might be called the respectable working class. I was told not to say ain't and fings and to speak properly. My mum attempted a standard English accent whilst my dad always had a thick Polish accent.

The experience of being second generation immigrant is important and often not recognised enough. I didn't feel a comfortable part of the English working class until later in my life when I experienced rebuff or rejection from middle class circles.

I was trained as an architect at Portsmouth Polytechnic but became an artist and writer. I have written a book *Class Myths and Culture* and organise Working Press "books by and about working class artists". I have recently been doing research for the Arts Council into artists' books.

TRACY DAVIDSON

born 1968

"My father spent a large part of my childhood and adolescence in prison. His crimes began with petty theft but later escalated into crimes of a violent nature. For many years I have carried around feelings of guilt and shame which I find very difficult to explain. I feel this is a direct result of being a part of a working class family where the attitudes towards emotional and physical struggles is "grin and bear it". The pressures of poverty leave no time for self indulgence, the only time available is for survival. These same social pressures can lead to working class people having low expectations of themselves which, perhaps, is why the majority of people in British prisons are from working class backgrounds.

In my final year at Goldsmiths' College I came to the conclusion that the only way forward was to deal with these negative thoughts in a very positive way; by making work about my life and experience."

Excerpt from "Grin and Bear It" an article for a special issue of *Feminist Art News* on working class women artists due for publication March 1993.

BOOKLIST (A variety of mainly non academic books)

1. Trudgill, Peter *Accent Dialect and School* Arnold 1975.
2. Honey, John *Does Accent Matter?* Faber and Faber 1991.
3. Upton, Sanderson, Widdowson *Word Maps, A Dialect Atlas of England* Croom Helm 1987.
4. Harris, Roxy *Language and Power* H.B.J. 1990 approx. a unique collection of learning materials (Orig. ILEA).
5. Kean, Hilda ed. *English Teaching and Class, a Discussion document* ILEA 1987.
6. Mason, Micheline *Nothing Special* Working Press 1989.
7. Sanderson, Michael *Educational Opportunity, and Social Change in England* Faber and Faber 1987.
8. Blackwell, Trevor *A World Still to Win, The Reconstruction of the Post-War Working Class* Faber and Faber 1985.
9. Worpole, Ken *Dockers and Detectives* Verso 1983.
10. Jackins, Harvey *The Human Side of Human Beings* Rational Island, Seattle 1978-92.
11. Szczelkun, Stefan *Class Myths & Culture* Working 1990.
12. Steedman, Carolyn *Landscape for a Good Woman* Virago 1986.
13. Common, Jack *Kiddar's Luck* Bloodaxe 1990 (orig. 1951)
14. Jackson, Brian. and Dennis Marsden *Education and the Working Class* Pelican 1970 (One of a series published by the Institute of Community Studies, first published 1962).
15. Wright, D.G. *Popular Radicalism, The Working-Class Experience 1780-1880* Longmans 1989.
16. **The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP)** c/o 23 Victoria Park Road, Tunstall, Stoke-on-Trent, ST6 6DX 0782 822327. The FED should be able to guide you to grass roots publishing in print in your area. Mostly poetry. Quite a bit of stuff by women.
17. Davidson, Al *The Minotaurs Tale* VG Graphics 1992.
18. Healy, John *The Grass Arena* Faber and Faber 1990.
19. Turner, Richard *In Your Blood, Football Culture in the late 1980's and early 1990's* Working Press 1990.
20. Lambert, Margaret. and Enid Marx *English Popular Art* Merlin 1989 (orig. 1951).
21. Bourdieu, Pierre *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* Routledge 1989 (Orig. Paris 1979).

CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

1. A group of about 10 - 15 is best
2. A group who choose to be there is more effective (the presence of a head etc can make the group less safe....)
3. Within the prices quoted below we will provide a folder of support data.
4. Travel expenses are extra and must be found.
5. We could work with parents.
6. Fees include setting up, documentation and preparation. (We have no ongoing grant support.)
7. Full references are available on request.

FEES:

Two & a half hour / half day workshop	£150
as above with 2 trainers	£200
Day workshop/ 5 hours + 1 hour lunch	£300
as above with 2 trainers	£400
Fifty minute lecture	£60

PLEASE CONTACT;

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071 735 6221**

PLEASE NOTE:

1. The one hour talks are suitable for groups of students as well as staff. Usefully part of sociology or history curricula.
 2. Tracy Davidson may not be available in the year 93/94 as she is going to France.
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WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING
WORKING CLASS OPPRESSION

Equal Opportunities

EQUALS MIDDLE CLASS
EQUALITY



£1.00

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